Testimony to the Education Committee
In Support of RHB 5352
AAC Student-Centered Learning
Submitted by Michelle Doucette Cunningham
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Good morning, Senator Stillman, Representative Fleischmann, and members of the Education Committee. My name is Michelle Doucette Cunningham, and I am the Executive Director of the Connecticut After School Network a statewide alliance representing the thousands of children, parents and staff who participate in after school and summer programs all across the state. I am here today, on behalf of the After School Network, to support Raised House Bill 5352, *An Act Concerning Student-Centered Learning* and to urge the inclusion of more specific language for community involvement in this new program.

In brief, creative approaches to student-centered learning have been shown to dramatically decrease dropout rates while helping students learn essential 21st century skills.

This bill would establish a pilot program that creates greater flexibility in when, where, and how students learn. By funding 10 three-year grants to school districts through a competitive process, this pilot will begin a process of innovation and improvement that has great potential for improving educational outcomes in Connecticut.

Why we need student-centered learning

Connecticut needs more student-centered learning for three reasons:

- TAXPAYERS: We have unacceptably high dropout rates across many schools and districts. Almost 10,000 Connecticut students dropped out of the class of 2007 for a total of lost additional lifetime earnings of $2.5 billion.[i]
- EMPLOYERS: We know that employers are looking for higher, more flexible and diverse skills for even entry level jobs. Critical-thinking and problem solving top the list of skills cited by CEOs as needed in the employees of tomorrow.[ii]
- STUDENTS: Many students are disengaged – two-thirds report being bored on a daily basis in school and 17% are bored all the time. A large majority of students (82%) want more opportunities to be creative in school. They need to see the relevance between what they are learning and why they need to know it.[iii]

The New Hampshire Model

While there are numerous models of personalized learning in different states, the most effective model is found in New Hampshire, which started a similar pilot initiative in 2008. A comprehensive analysis of the pilot program conducted by the University of Massachusetts Donahue Institute showed strong positive results.[iv] The New Hampshire Department of Education uses the broad term "extended learning opportunities" or ELOs, to describe this type of student-centered learning, which they define as "the primary acquisition of knowledge and skills through instruction or study outside of the traditional classroom methodology, including, but not limited to: apprenticeships, community service, independent study, online courses, internships, performing groups, and private instruction."

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The intent of this initiative is to harness community resources and technology to provide a world-class, personalized, student-centered education in a flexible, innovative learning environment that promotes active engagement to maximize the potential in every individual. As they begin to scale up the initiative, the state school board gives local school boards and districts permission to be flexible and creative in the way schools award credits to students for learning in a variety of settings.[v]

What does it look like in practice?

ELOs in New Hampshire have for structural components: research, reflection, product, and presentation, and three participant roles: student, community mentor, and highly qualified teacher. Here are four samples:

- **Science**: The local need for help with a community garden inspired this ELO, where students explored ecosystems, cellular structures, nutrition, energy, water, and nitrogen cycles. After designing their plots, students also decided where to donate a portion of their produce, following up on the life of local food. These students were focused on the essential questions, *"Where does food come from? Where does it go?"*
- **English:** *"Why Poetry?"* An entire English class participated in a regional Poetry Slam competition at a local cafe, working with independent poets and an English teacher to refine students' expressive language arts abilities. They prepared for the competition by journaling, practicing, and critiquing each other. Many continued on to write poetry beyond the ELO.
- **Science:** A student interning with a cardiac surgeon explored the connections between biotechnology and the medical field. She worked with a Biology teacher to connect anatomy and physical systems to the cardiac surgery she observed. She continued on to pursue a medical career beyond high school.
- **Math:** A visual learner who hated math learned and applied her entire geometry curriculum through origami. She worked with a glass artist who creates "mathematically accurate art" and demonstrated geometric proofs, trigonometric functions, and complex polyhedra while answering the essential question, *"Can math BE art?"*

Community Involvement

At the core of these types of student-centered learning is relevance. It is through the connections to the world outside the classroom that this relevance is found. One way to improve RHB 5352 would be to add "connections to community resources" as a criteria for evaluating the proposed pilot projects, in section 1, subsection (b). This would help to ensure the relevance of the student learning. ***Studying germs in the classroom might be interesting, but studying them at a hospital can be life-changing, inspiring a passion for learning and a career as a doctor.***

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[i] Alliance for Excellent Education, "The High Cost of High School Dropouts," October 2007. www.all4ed.org.
[ii] Tony Wagner, Harvard Graduate School of Education, "Seven Survival Skills," www.tonywagner.com, from his 2008 book *The Global Achievement Gap*.
[iii] "2009 High School Survey of Student Engagement," Center for Evaluation and Education Policy at Indiana University, http://www.ceep.indiana.edu/hssse/.
[iv] The New Hampshire Extended Learning Opportunities Evaluation: Final Report of Evaluation Findings, May 2011, http://www.education.nh.gov/innovations/elo/documents/evaluation.pdf.
[v] For more information on the New Hampshire Extended Learning Opportunities see: www.beyondclassroom.org and www.education.nh.gov/innovations/elo/index.htm.